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ABSTRACT

Anecdotal evidence suggests that college students are unaware of the socially constructed nature of news reports. Students may accept uncritically what they view and read. A narrative analysis of front-page coverage from the "New York Times" and the "Washington Post" of the 1990 Persian Gulf situation reveals how the papers constructed and defined the crisis in a meaningful way. Initial coverage was a fairly stereotypical representation of Middle East crises. Reports portrayed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein as a dictatorial aggressor planning to take over the region, threatening the United States' oil supplies, but unrestrained by other Arab nations. Analysis of the situation was superficial and homogenous. Early on, attention focused on Iraq's supposed intention to invade Saudi Arabia and Jordan's close affiliation with Iraq. The conflict was reported not as a dispute between Iraq and occupied Kuwait, but rather, a crisis for the United States and Saudi Arabia. This theme was introduced and reified by the predominant use of U.S. officials representing the perspective supporting the scenario, and discredited non-U.S. speakers representing the perspective challenging that scenario. Comparisons of the conflict to World War II were underscored by reports in the newspapers equating Saddam Hussein with Adolph Hitler. Such public discourse is useful data for helping students appreciate the power of language to shape and reinforce world views. (Fourteen references and an appendix of headlines are attached.) (SG)

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"Constraints on Critical Thinking: An Analysis of News Narratives"

Conference on College Composition and Communication, March 1992

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According to Resnick and Resnick (1977) standards of literacy have gone beyond the ability to read and write to requiring a more sophisticated notion of being able to apply those basic skills in an increasingly complex and contradictory world. Often, however, we see students unable to meet this challenge to think critically as their method of understanding and making meaning of a text continues to emphasize summarizing the overt message of a text. According to Higgins, Mathison, and Flower (unpubl. manuscr.), in their study of students' use of rival hypotheses as a literate pratice in their writing, "there is an absence of alternative positions being offered in students papers..., few students go beyond summarizing positions presented in the texts and few students engaged in analysis, i.e., criticizing and providing alternative explanations of the evidence." (p. 15). Applebee et al., (1987) also reports that students tend to demonstrate only a surface level understanding of what they read and write, seemingly unable to critically examine the content of their reading and writing, i.e., analyze, evaluate and extend ideas presented. Furthermore, Applebee attributes these literate practices to the training students receive in high school--where they are expected to reiterate rather than create their own perspective or stance based on analysis and interpretation. These literate practices may also, however, reflect the way students are socialized to passively accept the overt messages presented in certain types of texts and discourses. Although I agree with Applebee's assessment of the literacy training students receive in high school, in this talk I want to extend the discussion of why students seem to emphasize the overt, surface messages of a text into the realm of public discourse. That is, school is only one place where students are exposed to literate practices; they may also be influenced by the literate practices of the media--by the rhetorical and linguistic strategies used by the mass media to convey information about complex and ambiguous situations to the public. My interest in this issue was sparked by an incident I had in a freshman composition course a couple of years ago. Students were asked to bring in a newspaper article

addressing an issue of interest to them. In class they were asked to analyze and discuss the argumentative and persuasive strategies used by the reporter to render the account meaningful. The general consensus of the class was that the articles did not contain "arguments", but rather were merely "reports" reflecting an event which took place in the world. While this is clearly anecdotal evidence, this incident suggested to me a lack of awareness of the socially constructed nature of these news representations. Or to put it in slightly different terms, a lack of awareness to the necessary link between meaning, persuasion, and rhetoric. That is, by distinguishing news articles as a type of discourse which does not involve "arguments" which construct events but merely "reports" which reflect events, these students presented an attitude that neglects the intrinsic social bias of news discourse. My interest in this issue, then, is to consider how the constructed nature of public discourse may be hidden by the rhetorical and linguistic devices used to render the text meaningful.

Toward this end, my talk will present a narrative analysis of the NYTs and WP front-page coverage of the 1990 Persian Gulf situation (i.e., August 2-8, 1990). My question originally motivating this analysis was, How did the language and discourse of these papers act to "construct" the events of the Persian Gulf situation, and thereby define the situation in a meaningful way? Furthermore, I was interested in whether or not this initial definition was carried through in subsequent reports. In sum, I was interested in testing the hypothesis offered by Lance Bennett (1985), among others, that the news media presents the *appearance* of supporting dialogue while, in fact, its presentations are highly didactic--it invites the public to debate social issues only *after* the relevant aspects of the issues have been defined in a way that limits the future turns the debate can take.

Before I present my analysis, I want to briefly explain why I believe narrative theory

offers an appropriate method for examining public discourse, in particular the discourse of print journalism. First, the narrative mode is increasingly recognized by theorists ranging from literary critics to socio-linguists to historians to rhetoricians as a ubiquitous means of communicating the norms, attitudes, and presuppositions of a culture or social group (Labov, Stewart, White, Mink, Turner, Barthes, Fisher, Farrell, McGee and Nelson). As McGee and Nelson (1985) explain, the narrative mode functions as a "techne of translation", as a rhetorical device for translating distant and unfamiliar situations into familiar cultural patterns and procedures. In this sense, narrative serves a "communal function" in helping to establish audience identification with a particular perspective on an issue. Secondly, in fulfilling this communal function, a narrative account must compete with alternative accounts attempting to represent a particular situation. As Hayden White (1980) argues, the value of narrative discourse lies, in part, in its ability to resolve competing claims about "reality". In this sense, then, narrative serves a mediating function. These communal and mediating functions of narrative are particularly interesting when related to news discourse; that is, the rhetorical situation of a news organization is such that it needs to present complex and ambiguous information in a clear and readily understandable form, while simultaneously maintaining the journalistic standard of "fair and balanced" reporting. Applying a narrative analysis to news discourse may help reveal how news organizations attempt to simultaneously fulfill these potentially conflicting goals and requirements. Now to my analysis.

(OH1) In general, the narrative presented in the intial week of coverage was a fairly stereotypical representation of Middle East (ME) crises". As illustrated by this excerpt , the daily articles cohered to form a story told by US governmental officials and experts about a dictatorial aggressor planning to take over the ME, threatening the US oil supply, with the other Arab nations, paralyzed by infighting, unable to work

together to solve their disputes, and thereby necessitating US involvement. **(OH2)** This representation was actualized in this situation as follows: Contrary to my expectations, the "central action", or theme of the narrative was not the Iraqi/Kuwaiti conflict, but rather the scenario of Iraq invading Saudi Arabia (SA). This theme was developed by 1) superficial and repetitious explanation of the context and history surrounding the I/K conflict. As such, the invasion immediately became defined as an act of "naked aggression". 2) the repetition of consistent and homogeneous arguments that Iraq was planning to invade Saudi Arabia. What is interesting about these arguments is that a) they were based on assertions presented only by US officials; b) counters or alternative assertions presented to explain the situation were systematically negated; and c) "evidence" presented to support the I /SA assertion was superficial in light of the attention this scenario received in both papers. Let me be a bit more specific now by illustrating this narrative with some excerpts from the NYTs and WP.

(OH3) This excerpt is representative of all the explanations of the context and history surrounding the I/K conflict presented by the NYTs and WP during the first week of coverage. Items that are of interest include: Iraq (represented by the underline) is consistently presented as the agent performing some aggressive, negative actions against the innocent patient, Kuwait--breaking off talks, invading, demanding, accusing, suspending debt payments to US, etc. In contrast to this characterization of Iraq and its actions, Kuwait (in italics) is represented as the patient suffering from Iraq's actions; when Kuwait is represented in the agent role, it is presented as performing actions which would be viewed as "favorable" from a US perspective--forcing down oil prices, violating opec production quotas, etc. **{OH 3A}** The impact of this explanation of the context and history is to help reify the definition of the situation as an act of naked aggression against Kuwait, and to begin setting the stage for the assertion that

the Kuwaiti invasion is only the first invasion Iraq is planning.

As I mentioned earlier and which I will demonstrate a little later, the US assertion that I intended to invade SA was supported, in part, by the systematic negation of counter statements challenging that assertion. One negation strategy used was to represent these counter statements through "discredited" speakers. In the coverage of both the NYTs and WP this speaker was King Hussein of Jordan. **{OH4}** This stategy was initially used in the representation of Jordan's attempts to provide an explanation of the context and history surrounding the I/K conflict as shown in this excerpt. Things to note include: there is no elaboration of the "historical reasons" suggested by King Hussein; rather attention is focused on representing the relationship between King Hussein and Saddam Hussein. More specifically, the headline of this article is "Jordan's King Hussein Defends Iraqi President", and the front page portion of the article explains King Hussein describing Saddam as a "patriot", and King Hussein's "solidarity with Saddam". The front page also includes a statement from a US official that King Hussein of Jordan is a "master at strategic misjudgment" and that "there is no rational way" to explain King Hussein's behavior. It is after this front page representation of Jordan and King Hussein that the articles present this brief statement concerning the history and context of the I/K conflict; furthermore, these statements from Jordan are the only statements which offer such a perspective.

{OH 5} By the 2nd day of coverage both papers suggest a shift in attention away from Kuwait and toward SA as SA is represented as symbolizing US interests--NYTs: "deeper fears concern SA"; and the WP: "struggle between the US and I over SA". **{OH6}** This shift in attention is furthered later in the articles, as the 2nd page of both papers presents the initial assertion that Iraq is planning to invade SA. First the NYTs. Items of interests here include the appeals to authority presented by the allusions to

the CIA briefing and the Brookings Institute; the reference back to the "ultimate aims of Hussein", which helps to reinforce the point that Kuwait was just an illustration of Hussein's real plans and goals; and also the "empirical" evidence supporting the assertion: the proximity of SA to K and the nature of the terrain separating the 2 countries. Finally, the placement of this excerpt is important to the development of the Iraq/SA argument. That is, this excerpt is embedded in text which includes a US Senator's analogy of Hussein to Hitler, a statement criticizing the indecisiveness of US policy toward Iraq, and alongside an insert saying, "Baghdad swoops in, the world recoils, but what is the West to do?" **{OH 6A}**Similarly, the WP excerpt, also repleat of "empirical" evidence, is laced with allusions to Hitler and also Mussolini. **(drink)**

{OH7} By August 4 the I/ SA scenario was promoted from 2nd page coverage to headline and lead status in both papers. However, this "promotion" is not accompanied by an increase in the amount of "empirical" evidence supporting the assertion.--NYTs: noting troop movement south, massing on the border; **{change oh}** WP: presents Bush emphasizing SA as being of vital interest to the US The evidence supporting the assertions comes on the 2nd page of both papers. **{OH7A}** I am going to focus on NYTs coverage here. Again, note that US officials are the only sources of information; also the SA theme is maintained and supported by the analogies made to Hitler and Europe of the 1930s. Immediately after this excerpt a discussion of the similarities between the current ME situation and Europe before the outbreak of WWII is presented. **{OH7B}** Furthermore, these last two excerpts from the NYTs are presented immediately alongside a graphic comparing the military strength of I and SA, which accentuates the power of the Iraqi army.

Also on august 4 we begin to see a change in the nature of the statement concerning the I/SA scenario as it shifts from being an assertion toward becoming a presupposed

or generally accepted "fact"; **{OH8}** as this excerpt from the NYTs states, a lack of US involvement means sacrificing SA to I. This change in status however comes without critical attention by US officials to the initial assertion that I was planning to invade SA or criticism of the evidence supporting that assertion. Also, neither paper presents US officials considering alternative scenarios. Rather, beginning on Aug 4 through the 8th their story is advanced and reinforced by the papers reporting what these officials were saying the US *should or could* do in light of the impending invasion. After Aug. 8 attention is turned to reporting what US officials were saying that the US *was doing* in light of the impending invasion. This "fact" is further established by the strategies used for representing the counter positions offered against the I/SA scenario. That is, Iraq and Jordan are the only characters which present counters to the US definition of the ME situation. I want to conclude my analysis, then with a brief discussion of the representation of Iraq and Jordan's position toward the I/SA scenario. **{OH 9}** First Iraq. What is interesting here, and is a fairly regular strategy used by both papers, is the forefronting of the US definition and then the representation of the non-US statement in the form of a denial. In other words, the US statement is represented as reflecting the reality of the situation with the role of the non-US source, in this case Iraq, being to accept or deny that reality, but not to offer an alternative perspective. **{OH9A}** Jordan is the only other non-US source addressing the I/SA scenario. Again I am going to focus on the NYTs here, just noting that the WP representation of Jordan is very similar to the that of the NYTs. This excerpt from the NYTs is followed by an explanation of the difficult political and financial position Jordan is in; however this explanation is presented such that it acts to further align Jordan with Iraq and, thus, to further distance Jordan from the US. More specifically, this excerpt is followed by the statement that King Hussein **{OH9B}** "...has been one of Saddam's strongest backers since the Gulf War and lately Iraqi military officers have been working with the Jordanian army, but he also has long ties to the West." And immediate after this

statement is a restatement of Jordan's abstention--along with the PLO and Libya--from the vote condemning Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

To summarize, this analysis of the extended narrative presented by the NYTs and WP shows the representation of the 1990 ME conflict as a story not about US concern over I/K conflict, but rather the construction of a story about I and SA. This theme was introduced and subsequently reified by the predominant use of US officials representing the perspective supporting the I/SA scenario and non-US, discredited speakers representing the perspective challenging that scenario. These position were further reinforced by stereotypical representation of the ME coupled with analogies of the ME situation to WWII and Saddam Hussein to Adolph Hitler.

I want to conclude by stressing the value of public discourse as useful data for helping students appreciate the power of language to shape, as well as to reinforce, world views--that is, the power of language to contruct events in such a way that they read, not as constructions but rather as reflections of the world. Or, as Kenneth Burke explains, to help students appreciate that "Wherever there is persuasion there is rhetoric and wherever there is meaning there is persuasion." (as appearing in Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 1985)

Thank you

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(OH1)

New York Times August 3

Western experts asserted that Iraq had been motivated by a financial squeeze that only more oil dollars could ease and by ambitions for regional dominance

Washington Post August 3

Lawmakers warned that the invasion could upset the region's delicate balance. "You're talking about something that could totally unravel the whole Middle East," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt). "We would be very wrong to underestimate the ultimate aims of Saddam Hussein," Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said after being briefed by intelligence officials. "His long-range goal is not just to impact on the price of oil...but establish Iraqi hegemony over the entire region."

{OH 2}

I) CENTRAL ACTION of the narrative was not the Iraqi/Kuwaiti (I/K) conflict, but rather the scenario of Iraq invading SA (I/SA).

II) STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING I/SA SCENARIO:

A) superficial and repetitious explanation of the context/history of I/K conflict. Immediately defined as "naked aggression."

B) repetition of consistent arguments that Iraq intended to invade Saudi Arabia.

1) assertions only from US officials;

2) systematic negation of counters/alternative assertions; and,

3) "evidence" presented to support the I/SA assertion was superficial in light of the attention this scenario received.

{OH3}

New York Times **August 2** (emphasis added)

IRAQI ARMY INVADES CAPITAL OF KUWAIT IN FIERCE FIGHTING

(1) The attack followed mounting concerns within the administration over Iraq's intentions after Iraq broke off talks on Wednesday with Kuwait aimed at resolving a two-week old border, oil and money crisis.

(2) Iraq has also been demanding that Kuwait, which draws much of its oil from fields that straddle the disputed border, pay back billions of dollars in compensation for the revenues that Baghdad says have resulted from Kuwait *forcing down the price of oil.*

{OH 3a}

Washington Post **August 2** (emphasis added)

"IRAQI FORCE INVADES KUWAIT; TANKS, TROOPS STORM CAPITAL"

...the invasion began..., less than 24 hours after the two countries had broken off talks aimed at defusing the crisis in their relations caused by Iraqi demands for territorial and financial concessions.

{OH 4}

Washington Post **August 5**

JORDAN'S KING HUSSEIN DEFENDS IRAQI PRESIDENT

Describing the Iraqi takeover of Kuwait as "very sad," Hussein [of Jordan] said it did not, however, come "out of the blue." He said there were historical reasons for the conflict between Iraq and Kuwait. The King said the problem reached "ominous" proportions during the Arab summit in Baghdad last May until "finally, it erupted."

{OH 5}

Washington Post **August 3** (emphasis added)

Meanwhile, throughout the day U.S. officials sought world wide cooperation in an embargo on Iraq's oil exports and a halt in arms sales to Iraq. While Washington harshly condemned the invasion of Kuwait, *its deeper fears centered on the emirate's neighbor, Saudi Arabia.*

New York Times **August 4** (emphasis added)

With Iraq having overrun Kuwait, the crisis in the Persian Gulf *appears to be turning into a struggle between the United States and Iraq for influence over Saudi Arabia and its vast oil reserves.*

New York Times **August 3** **(emphasis added)**

(0+6)

"Fears Over Saudi Arabia"

Several lawmakers suggested that Mr. Hussein might now be emboldened to move into neighboring Saudi Arabia. Senator David Boren, Democrat of Oklahoma, who was *briefed by the Central Intelligence Agency* this morning, noted that the primary *Saudi oilfields are only 250 miles from Kuwait, with no terrain "that would impede a rapid movement of forces"* by Iraq.

"We have to understand that our national interests are very much at stake," Mr. Boren said. " I think it would be wrong to underestimate *the ultimate aims of Saddam Hussein.* He really hopes in the long run to put Iraq on par with the kind of power he sees the Western powers as having."

Judith Kipper, *Middle East specialist at the Brooking Institution,* described the conflict in Kuwait as a "war of resources". "This is the first post-cold-war crisis in the economically dependent world," she said. With the end of the East-West game, small countries can act with impunity to rearrange the neighborhood. Iraq is a superpower in its own area, but they need cash to service their debt and rebuild their oil industry. He gets cash form oil; oil prices are going up. Plus, they have historic claims to Kuwait, which Saddam Hussein has chosen to act upon."

{OH 6a}

Washington Post **August 3:**

Western diplomats here [Kuwait] reported that Iraqi troops were making their way to the southern part of Kuwait, and one said they appeared intent on going all the way to the Saudi border. Most of Kuwait's rich oil fields are in the south.

...lawmakers irrupted with condemnations of the Iraqi leader as a 'madman' and many compared him to Adolph Hitler or Benito Mussolini...

Particularly worrisome is the proximity of the Saudi oilfields, which provide the United States with about 1/2 million barrels of oil a day . Any attempt to take the area, Boren said would be "a direct threat to the national security of this country....

{OH 7}

New York Times August 4

IRAQIS MASS ON SAUDI FRONTIER; ARABS AGREE TO MEET ON CRISIS; BUSH IS READY TO HELP IF ASKED

U.S. WEIGHS ACTION

Tells NATO Allies of Plan for Use of Military if Baghdad Advances

WASHINGTON, Aug. 3 -- Powerful Iraqi forces wheeled into position for a possible attack on Saudi Arabia today,while the United States and its allies continued to search, without discernible success, for a way to force Iraq to pull back from its rapid conquest of Kuwait on Thursday.

{OH7}

Washington Post **August 4**

U.S. Warns Iraq Not to Attack Saudi Arabia
Baghdad's Troops Seen Near Border

U.S. Intelligence yesterday monitored a new build up of 100,000 Iraqi troops in Kuwait south of the capital and near the border with Saudi Arabia, prompting President Bush to warn that the "integrity of Saudi Arabia" is one of America's "vital interests".

{OH 7A}

New York Times **August 4** (emphasis added)

Pentagon officials **said that more than 60,000 Iraqi troops were *massing* in the southern part of Kuwait, *not far from a major oilfield in Saudi Arabia.***

A State Department spokesman, **Richard A. Boucher, said Iraqi troops were within 5 to 10 miles of the frontier. The British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, said the Iraqis were *massing* on the border.**

The White House press secretary, **Marlin Fitzwater, said, "They are close enough to the Saudi border to indicate cause for concern, but we don't know what their intentions or motives are."**

Squabbling broke out in the Bush administration over who bore the responsibility for the United States being caught flat-footed by the Iraqi offensive.

{OH 7B}

New York Times August 4

'Parallel Drawn to 1930's'

Increasingly, military analysts, scholars and politicians compare the situation in the Middle East with that in Central Europe in the 1930's--with a dictatorial aggressor, determined to gobble up neighboring countries, moving boldly while the rest of the world wondered what to do about it.

Saudi Arabia seemed to be in the pivotal position...

{OH 8}

New York Times **August 4** (emphasis added)

'Draw the Line in the Sand'

It remained unclear whether the United States planned to move boldly to counter the Iraq takeover in Kuwait, *or tacitly acquiesce in it while throwing down the gauntlet on Saudi Arabia,* or do neither.

{OH9}

New York Times **August 4** (emphasis added)

'Military Option Said to Gain'

Top American officials indicated that military intervention of some kind was rising rapidly to the top of their list of options. The United States told allies at NATO headquarters in Brussels that it had contingency plans for a military response if Iraq pushed on.

The State Department said 14 American oilfield workers were missing and were presumably in the hands of the Iraqis. But Iraq's Ambassador in Washington, Mohammed al-Mashat, *denied* in an interview that an attack on Saudi Arabia was imminent and insisted that Iraq held no Americans.

Washington Post August 4

U.S. official said an Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia would almost certainly trigger a U.S. military response. Iraq *denied* that its troops were near the border with Saudi Arabia.

(OH 9A)

New York Times August 5

In many parts of the Arab world, however, the reactions was more muted, cautious and even in some cases somewhat approving.

'Support from Jordan'

Defending the Iraqi President, King Hussein of Jordan....the Jordanian Monarch warned against any military intervention by non-Arab countries.
..."I can only say that any foreign intervention, be it Israeli or otherwise in the Arab world, will have a very, very bad reaction and could set the whole area ablaze." He said the Arab leaders were "trying to contain" the situation and asserted that there was "no threat to Saudi Arabia or any other Arab state.

{OH9B)

New York Times **August 5**

King Hussein "...has been one of Saddam's strongest backers since the Gulf War and lately Iraqi military officers have been working with the Jordanian army, but he also has long ties to the West."